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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KCRM](#) [SOCI](#)  
SUBJECT: THE MEDELLIN MIRACLE LOSES ITS LUSTER

CLASSIFIED BY: Brian A. Nichols, Deputy Chief of Mission; REASON:  
1.4(B), (D)

Summary

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¶1. (C) Medellin's homicide rate continues to climb, reversing positive trends experienced between 2002 and 2008. Residents attribute the rise in murders to local criminal groups competing for turf in Medellin's underworld. As the GOC successfully eliminates cocaine kingpins nationally, drug trafficking groups compete for control of lucrative territory and routes once held by the defunct cartel that was known as the "Office of Envigado." Governmental response at the urban level remains inadequate due to poor coordination, corruption, political jockeying, and lack of resources. NGOs and the Catholic Church see the underlying causes as a lack of ethics, education, and opportunities for Medellin's youth. Some question whether President Alvaro Uribe's democratic security policy is effective in Colombia's major cities, where 70 percent of Colombians reside. End Summary.

Homicides Rise Among Criminal Groups

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¶2. (C) Polcouns visited Medellin on November 18-19 to examine GOC efforts to stem the rising homicide rate in this city of 2.5 million. Although figures vary, most authorities agreed that homicides for 2009 had reached nearly 1,800 through October, a significant jump over 2008's yearly total of 1,050 (see para 11). The increase translates to a murder rate of 72 per 100,000 inhabitants. October alone saw 226 murders, making it the most violent month thus far in 2009. Medellin Secretary of Government Juan Diego Velez, whose predecessor was fired in September for failing to stem the violence, asserted that 85% of the murders were related to illegal narcotics or gang violence. He noted that most murders took place near the "borders" of Medellin's neighborhoods rather than exclusively in poor areas. He concluded from this that the violence was a result of turf wars among criminal bands rather than a function of poverty.

Medellin's "Mafia Culture"

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13. (C) Sources drew a distinction between international narco-trafficking activities and Medellin's rich history of organized crime. These included activities such as extortion, protection rackets, and control over prostitution, commerce, and transportation in specific neighborhoods. In addition, drug dealers were competing fiercely to control local markets and numerous sales points for cocaine and marijuana, Medellin's preferred drug. (Note: A 2008 study showed that Medellin had the highest rate of drug use in the country.) Jorge Arturo Bernal of the NGO Corporation Region said that the "mafia culture" even caused mothers to encourage their sons into illegality for the betterment of the family. Press reports estimate that some 150 street gangs, or "combos," were driving the street violence. Luciano Sanin of the National Unionist School saw Medellin's violence as cyclical, rising and falling between major anti-crime initiatives.

#### Enter Narco-Trafficking

14. (C) Medellin's access to Colombia's Caribbean and Pacific Coasts make it a natural crossroads for narco-trafficking. Weapons trafficking that often accompanies narco-trafficking adds to Medellin's violence. Javier Aguilar of the OAS Mission to Accompany the Peace Process (MAPP) posited that Medellin served as

the "business center" for traffickers throughout northern Colombia, noting that some potential murder victims were lured to Medellin to meet their fate. Aguilar said groups like Los Rastrojos ("Remnants" of the Norte del Valle Cartel) operated in the area but rarely functioned as a unit inside Medellin. Aguilar explained that, unlike in rural settings where a fully formed gang was needed, just one Rastrojo member with sufficient cash could easily recruit a local gang to carry out specific objectives in Medellin.

15. (C) One nexus between local mafia and the wider narco-trafficking circuit is the "Office of Envigado," the Medellin mob organization named after a municipality in the north of the city. Conventional wisdom states that the extradition of United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) paramilitary leader Diego Murillo (aka Don Berna) in May 2008 sparked the latest wave of violence. Two of Berna's lieutenants, Maximiliano Bonilla Orozco (aka Valenciano) and Erickson Vargas (aka Sebastian), are thought to be violently contesting the control of "The Office." Sectional Director for the Prosecutor General's Office Martha Cecilia Panagos believes there may be other leaders above these two who are in fact pulling the strings.

#### Institutional Responses Disjointed, Inadequate

16. (C) The fuzzy nature of the threat described above complicated efforts by national and local authorities to devise a coherent and effective strategy to stem the violence. President Uribe and other senior officials in Bogota routinely and publicly complained about poor performance by security officials. The Vice Ministers of Interior and Justice and of Defense had recently begun holding weekly organizational meetings in Medellin. Police Regional Commander Luis Alberto Perez said he was hoping to receive an additional 1,300 police officers in Medellin by the end of the year, bringing their total number to 7,000 for this city of 2.5 million. The police complained about prosecutors' unwillingness to press charges against suspects caught with illegal weapons.

Sectional Director Parango said the police were handing her cases without sufficient evidence for prosecution under the accusatory system. Prosecutors and police complained that judges were releasing suspects that should have been held pending further investigation. Stories of corruption abounded. Parango asserted that most of the gangs that had been busted had been shown to have active or retired members of the police within their ranks. NGOs alleged that the 4th Brigade of the Colombian Army, which guards the perimeter of Medellin, traffics the majority of the illegal weapons in the city. OAS/MAPP's Aguilar said his organization spent much of its time trying to coordinate efforts among these Colombian agencies.

#### Playing Politics with the Mayor

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17. (C) NGOs praised the anti-crime efforts of Medellin Mayor Alonso Salazar, a former crime journalist and secretary of government under former Mayor Sergio Fajardo, but acknowledged that the Mayor had no law enforcement powers. Salazar had started offering "non-aggression pacts" to several gangs in an effort to quell violence, though some NGOs saw this approach as legitimizing the city's criminal element. Several sources said that Salazar is sincere, but suffered from depression that would remove him from the public scene for days at a time. Salazar had publicly declared that "the State is not on my side" in the fight against crime. Although Uribe had not attacked Salazar directly, Uribe supporters had been hard on the Mayor. Salazar claimed that his losing opponent in the 2008 mayoral race had fabricated witnesses to accuse him of receiving campaign funds from Don Berna.

#### Ethics, Education, and Opportunities

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18. (C) Ana Mercedes Gonzalez, Director of Medellin daily El Colombiano, said her contacts repeatedly attributed Medellin's problems to a lack of ethics and values among the youth. Archbishop Giraldo concurred, noting that values even precede economic opportunity. He recounted a failed jobs program coordinated by the Catholic Church in which demobilized paramilitaries in a shoe-making enterprise squandered their profits on alcohol. The Church quickly added a 120-hour ethics course as a prerequisite. Amcham members said job opportunities for young men were deteriorating because Medellin, a food and textiles exporter, had been hit by both the global financial crisis and the economic embargo imposed by Venezuela.

#### Embassy Bogota Support Programs

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19. (U) Embassy programs in Medellin support the GOC effort. USAID has programs that include psycho-social attention, educational programs, and job training for demobilized ex-combatants and former child soldiers. Institutional support is provided to the Mayor's Office and Governor's Office. USAID has funded two Justice Houses (a one-stop shop for access to justice) in Medellin. The Narcotics Affairs Section (NAS) supports NGO Surgir and the Colombian National Police DARE (demand prevention) program, which NAS is currently helping to expand to high schools and parents. Recognizing that community involvement is key to preventing drug abuse, NAS and INL are helping Surgir to establish CADCA-based (Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America) drug demand prevention community coalitions in Medellin's vulnerable neighborhoods. The

Department of Justice supports the Sectional Director of the Prosecutor General's Office with technical assistance in homicide and organized crime investigations.

Comment: Rising Urban Insecurity

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¶10. (C) Medellin is an acute case, but these problems are increasingly common throughout Colombia. Bogota, Cali, and Barranquilla are also seeing a mild elevation in murder rates due to a similar mix of narco-trafficking and local gang violence. These developments have reopened a debate on the capacity of the GOC's Democratic Security Policy to address urban violence. Opponents suggest that the GOC's military-based model works well in the country but is not sophisticated enough for urban settings, where much more coordination among police, local authorities, and the justice sector is required. Some critics have taken to calling the criminal gangs "narco-paramilitaries" or "neoparamilitaries" to keep alive the specter of the AUC while acknowledging that these new groups do not have a national structure, political aspirations, or a counterinsurgency agenda. Whatever they are called, countering the threats posed by this new generation of criminals is becoming Colombia's next great security challenge. End comment.

¶11. (SBU) Colombia National Police Chart on Homicides in Metropolitan Medellin January-November 2008-2009:

	2008	2009	%chg.
January	104	101	-3%
February	68	87	28%
March	81	108	33%
April	84	166	98%
May	73	140	92%
June	95	122	28%
July	109	158	45%
August	107	195	82%
September	109	161	48%
October	118	273	131%
November	102	165	57%
Total	1,050	1,676	59%

Note: Official homicide figures vary widely and are subject to political pressure to keep the numbers low. The Mayor's Office, prosecutors, and most press reports put the number of homicides for Jan.-Nov. at more than 1,800. The police figures above are lower, but they nevertheless show a spike in October to 273 rather than the widely reported figure of 226. End note.

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